

**West Mojave Plan
Task Group 2
Green Tree Inn, Victorville
June 6, 2001**

Attendees

Task Group: Mike Ahrens, James Atkins, Margie Balfour, Pam Barber, Michelle Cassella, Mary Chow, Jerry Clark, Robert Cross, Paige Donahoe, Jennifer Foster, Ken Foster, Rich Gesner, John Gusse, Suellen Hall, Harold Johnson, Becky Jones, Peter Kiriakos, Paul Kober, Tim Lindsay, Jim Mills, Dick Moon, Jacki Morgan, Will Moring, Jerry C. Morrissey, Lisa Northrop, Doug Parham, Nancy Perry, Ed Phillips, Marshall Riley, Bob Sackett, Ray Sims, Deborah Stevens, Harold Stranderman, Robert Strub, Sharlyn Surprenant, Linda Underwood, Vern Underwood, Ed Waldheim.

West Mojave Team: Bill Haigh, Valery Pilmer.

Introductions

Bill Haigh opened the meeting at 9:55 AM and introduced the following agenda: 1) Review process and general policy issues raised; 2) General comments regarding improvements to reports and maps; 3) Mike Ahrens and Harold Johnson will discuss changes made to the Newberry Rodman maps in response to comments received.

Schedule and Process

Bill Haigh went over the schedule for the West Mojave Plan which shows an end date of December 2002. He indicated that the Congressional legislation passed last December regarding Fort Irwin imposes deadlines which the federal agency participants in the West Mojave planning process must strive to meet. Coordination between the Fort Irwin expansion and West Mojave Plan is necessary given the size and location of the expansion, and the need to ensure that the desert tortoise West Mojave recovery unit will work if the expansion plan goes forward.

General Questions and Comments

- The DWMAs as proposed are fragmented by freeways. Isn't this a problem?

Bill Haigh responded that there is some concern regarding this, and efforts are being made to help the tortoise get from one side of the freeway to the other (i.e. fencing as a way to funnel tortoises to culverts that pass under the freeway).

- Why does the expansion of Ft Irwin affect areas distant from the expansion?

Becky Jones, California Department of Fish and Game, responded that a minimum number of acres is needed to ensure the recovery of the tortoise within the West Mojave Recovery Unit.

- Several people expressed concern that roads were being closed in the West Mojave as mitigation for the expansion of Fort Irwin. People also expressed concerned that off highway vehicle use was being incrementally reduced in the desert by the cumulative actions of Congress and agencies of the federal government.
- Jeri Ferguson requested that a copy of the Key Elements Report on Fort Irwin be e-mailed to Task Group 1. She also would like to see some protection for recreation added to the West Mojave and CDCA Plan. Much land was lost to recreation in the Desert Protection Act, and her constituency would like to see some guarantee that whatever access network is provided now, won't disappear in the future.

Bill Haigh responded that he would e-mail the report to Task Group 1. He also indicated that in the future, any road closures would require an amendment to the Desert Plan. This provides a very public open process prior to any action being taken. Jeri Ferguson reiterated that she would like to see some protection written into the plan.

- Doug Parham commented that dirt bikes and quads ridden by kids seem to do the most damage off road. He feels the Bureau of Land Management (BLM) needs to zero in on who is doing the damage and put some control on it.
- Pam Barber noted that equestrian groups need an adequate route network for staging areas, and to provide access for their vehicles which carry water for the horses on long rides.
- Several attendees indicated considerable concern for the timeline. They indicated that the timeframe is overly aggressive, that it will be difficult for consultants and staff to complete the work, and will pose a real hardship on the public members who are attempting to check the route network. It was noted that it is very difficult to check the routes during the summer heat. Horsemen can't check routes on horseback during the summer because of the heat. A suggestion was made to postpone work on all subregions except those called out in the stipulated agreement.

Bill Haigh noted that the critical subregions are those included in the stipulated agreement, but that there are a few others that also are important to the West Mojave Plan. Overall there are about 10 of the 21 that are critical. The remainder need to be completed per the CDCA Plan, and BLM does not want to delay that effort any longer than necessary. He noted that staff would look at possible adjustments to the schedule to address the concerns raised.

Newberry-Rodman Interim Route Network

Bill Haigh discussed a special requirement of the stipulation which settled the BLM - Center for Biological Diversity (CBD) litigation. The stipulation requires that within five of the subregions which encompass most of desert tortoise critical habitat (Newberry-Rodman, Red Mountain, Superior, Fremont and Kramer), the BLM must implement an “interim” route network. The BLM will do this in the following manner. After the end of the 90 day “field check” being conducted by the West Mojave Plan for each of these subregions, the responsible BLM field office will review the public comments received by the interagency planning team, and will revise the network based upon those comments. An environmental assessment (EA - a document prepared to comply with the National Environmental Policy Act (NEPA)) will be prepared. The environmental documents and the proposed interim network will be circulated by BLM for additional public comments prior to final action. The interim route networks will be effective until the West Mojave Plan is completed, at which time they will be superseded by the route network established through the West Mojave planning process. The 90-day field check has been completed for the Newberry-Rodman subregion, and an interim route network has been proposed. Mike Ahrens, Barstow BLM, was asked to explain the process that the BLM’s staff established to review and respond to the public comments.

Mike Ahrens indicated that the public comments received on the Newberry-Rodman subregion were divided into two categories. Comments that were general and process oriented were considered separately from comments that were map or route specific. Specific comments were captured in a chart which will be included in the EA. An interdisciplinary team of BLM Barstow field office biologists and recreationists, and West Mojave Team staff and consultants then met to review the specific comments one by one, and changes to the suggested vehicle access network were made. Some of those changes are as follows:

- Azucar Mine. Access to the mine and nearby scenic viewpoint that had been shown as closed was redesignated as open.
- Kane Wash. Several comments were received on this area. Some proposed opening a route through the wash and to Kane Springs, while others supported closing access in the wash. A portion of the northern extension of Kane Wash was changed from a closed to an open designation in recognition of the need for a connector between routes in this area. The portion of the wash that leads to Kane Springs, however, was proposed to be closed in response to biological resource concerns.

Pam Barber expressed concern regarding the proposed closure at Kane Springs. Equestrian users enjoy and use the spring area. Jeri Ferguson noted that there are several springs in the Newberry and Rodman Wilderness areas, and questioned why this particular spring was so important. Bob Sackett noted that Kane Springs is used by cattlemen in the area, the best route in the area is through the wash, and the alternative route is a utility line road that is not desirable and presents a no challenge to riders. Others voiced similar

concerns. Mike Ahrens and Harold Johnson indicated they would relook at the Kane Springs issue.

- Silver Bell Mine. Mike Ahrens noted that access was opened up to Silver Bell Mine.

One individual stated that after reviewing the maps, about 8% of the routes shown to be closed do not exist. Harold Johnson, Barstow BLM, discussed how the route inventory was prepared, noting that 1994 aerial photographs were used to develop the inventory. Some of the routes previously noted have since rehabilitated, while new ones may have been created. The inventory, however, is the best information currently available.

The general comment was made that BLM staff needs to consider the ability of non-street licenced vehicles to use the network. Staff needs to look out for connections that use public roads. Jeri Ferguson noted that there may be a problem in this regard in the Red Mountain subregion. It was also noted that dual sports events need challenging routes and ones that aren't used all the time in order to make an interesting point to point trip.

Harold Johnson discussed what's next for the Newberry-Rodman subregion. The BLM will release it's EA and map of the proposed interim route network for public review for a period of 15 days. Comments received will be reviewed, and a final decision made.

Next meeting

The next Task Group 1 meeting is set for July 16th at 9:30 AM at the Green Tree Inn. [Note: The date was subsequently changed by Task Group 1 to July 17].

The next meeting of Task Group 2 was scheduled for Wednesday, July 25th in the evening from 6:00 to 9:00 PM. The meeting will be at the Victorville Green Tree Inn.

Bill Haigh noted that in response to requests, he will be setting up meetings in the Los Angeles area on the route designation process.

Ed Waldheim that at the future meetings he would like to see a more realistic schedule. Bill Haigh indicated a new schedule will be prepared that will address map availability and other agenda items. It was noted that participants need information ahead of time.